

DESIGNING A BLENDED SCHOOL LAW COURSE*

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Abstract

Beginning in August 2006, the author modified a school law course by moving from fifteen (15) weekly class meetings to eight (8) weekly class meetings and seven (7) online sessions. The blended or hybrid delivery system was adopted as part of a pilot project sponsored by the university's Institute for Teaching and Learning Excellence. The course has been delivered in the blended format five (5) times. This module describes the processes used to design the course, examples of materials developed, and the modifications made related to the following three instructional considerations: (1) the redesign of assignments and learning experiences; (2) the structure of opportunities for communication including the use of the university's online course management system; and (3) the organization of the course in relation to the schedule, the posting of materials, and the collection and grading of assignments including assessments.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

The Elements of Redesign

The assignments and learning experiences used in the fifteen-session course were redesigned using two major strategies: the modification of the structure of the chapter guides and the utilization of authentic online resources. These modifications are explained, the challenges are discussed, and examples are provided.

Modification of the Structure of the Chapter Guides

The author first considered how to modify the chapter guides. The guides had originally been designed to clarify the outcomes and activities related to each chapter in the text. They included the outcomes, the reading assignments, and seven problems building level administrators might encounter related to a chapter's topic. During class, candidates were placed into groups and given problems to solve based upon the readings, group members' applicable school board policies, and other relevant documents. Each group

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reported its solution and provided rationale, other class members asked questions, and the author delved and provided clarification as needed. The challenge for the blended course was how to move this interactive, problem-solving approach to an online environment. There were three significant issues or challenges the author faced.

The first issue was determining how to replicate the group interaction and discussion embedded in this instructional activity. To address this concern, the author utilized chat rooms for candidate group discussions of the seven problems or scenarios from the chapter guide. At the end of the chat, one candidate from each group emailed the group's response to its assigned problem to the instructor. The problems and the responses were posted on the university's online course management system by 6:00 p.m. the night of each class. Candidates had until 9:00 a.m. the day of the next class meeting to email their individual responses indicating whether they agreed or disagreed with each answer and providing their rationale. The instructor read the individual responses, provided written feedback, and determined what clarifications needed to be addressed during the next face-to-face class meeting.

The second issue was determining which chapters to assign for chat discussions and which chapters to assign to face-to-face class meetings. The author decided to assign topics to the chat room meetings that had required less clarification and assistance during class discussions during the previous semesters' traditional delivery. These topics included school attendance and instructional issues, discipline, teachers' rights, and teachers' employment issues. The frequently confusing and more complex topics were assigned to class meetings. These included the framework of school law, church and state relations, student classifications, and tort liability. Seven problems or scenarios had already been designed for each chapter guide that would accommodate seven chat groups. Three or four candidates were assigned to each group meeting the needs of a class ranging from twenty-one (21) to twenty-eight (28) members.

The third issue was not apparent until after the first time each chapter guide was used: not all of the scenarios clearly identified the legal problem to be resolved. The author had been able to answer questions and provide clarifications as groups worked on the problems during class meetings in the traditional course delivery. The chat rooms did not provide this opportunity so the author revised scenarios to provide clarity and guidance as well as added suggestions to help candidates address the problems. After each semester, the author has modified the instructions and the scenarios based upon the challenges candidates faced in completing the chats the previous semester.

The following is an example of a portion of a chapter guide modified for an online chat. Only the "outcomes" did not need to be modified to meet the needs of the online chat.

Example of Chapter Guide Used for Online Chat

School Attendance and Instructional Issues

Outcomes. After completion of this assignment, candidates will:

- Understand their state's compulsory attendance laws and how the laws are applied through local board policy.
- Understand how residency requirements are applied through local policy.
- Understand how local school board or school council policies guide curricular issues under state statutes.
- Understand how FERPA is applied as related to local board policies.
- Be able to analyze specific public schools situations and apply content knowledge to resolve each.
- Be aware of significant Supreme Court cases.

Preparation. Read each scenario. Keep each in mind as you read the text. Then find the Board of Education and/or School Council policy or policies for your school corporation or school district that you would need to answer the questions.

Online group work. You will work online with your partners to discuss the problem you have been assigned to solve. Share how the text supports or does not support your school board's or school council's policy or both. Each group will then email its solution to the instructor through the course management system. **MAKE SURE** you have the relevant policies available during for your online discussion group.

Individual work. You will have until Tuesday, September 18, 9:00 a.m. to respond to the seven solutions that will be posted at 6:00 p.m. on September 11. You need to indicate whether you agree or disagree with

each response and provide rationale. Your analysis of each answer must be emailed to the instructor. You will need your policies to determine if other groups have solved their problems correctly. Realize, though, that you may disagree with their solutions because of what your policies say.

Selected scenarios. You are the Principal and.....

1. A seventh grade team leader tells you in late March about a student who has been absent every other Monday since August. The student does not bring a note but has told the teachers he has been at church late on Sunday nights when he has spent the weekend with his dad. The team wants to know what can be done about this student since he has missed too much school and it is hard getting him his make-up work. What should have been done and what do you do now? (You may not agree on all elements of this problem due to differences in state laws on truancy.)

2. The school secretary is in charge of enrolling students new to the school. When you return from a meeting at the district's central office, you find a note from the secretary note telling you that a parent from Mexico came in to register two children. The secretary told the parent that they could not come to school unless they were here legally and that she needed her papers to prove it. What should the secretary have done? What do you do? (Make sure you link this to a Supreme Court case. Study your board policies on enrollment, attendance areas, and attendance as these may have information to assist you.)

Utilization of Authentic Online Resources

The second area of redesign focused on the use of authentic and online resources. Prior to the blended course, candidates were required to use their student codes of conduct, school board and school policies, employee handbooks, and state laws and regulations in solving problems. They had been encouraged to locate and use these resources online. In the blended course, the use of these online resources was required. To introduce this, candidates were required to complete a web search designed to acquaint them with relevant online resources needed during both the face-to-face classes and the online work. The only challenge was meeting the needs of candidates who did not have the skills needed to access and use the online resources. The author addressed the issue by securing a computer lab to use in guiding candidates as they worked to locate the required resources. The web search assignment was distributed during the last hour of the first class meeting. Candidates comfortable with the assignment were permitted to leave and others were invited to stay for assistance. The following is an excerpt of the web search assignment with the rationale for each item added.

Online Assignment

Examples from a Web Search

1. Use the Library link to Lexis-Nexis. Find the Sixth Circuit Court case with your professor named as the defendant. What is the case? _____ Now find a case in the state court where your professor was the plaintiff. What is the case? _____

Rationale: Candidates have an authentic reason to search for cases in both federal and state court systems. The cases help explain and demonstrate the framework of school law during a subsequent class meeting. In courses where the instructor has not been involved in litigation, cases of local interest or recent national attention could be identified.

2. Name of your district: _____ Go to your school district's website. Is there a link to the Board of Education's policy? _____ Is there a link to your Student Code of Conduct? _____

Rationale: Candidates use these documents throughout the course beginning with the second class meeting. If the documents are not online, the candidates must locate hard copies in their schools or districts.

3. Go to the Lexis-Nexis website. Find the legal research link and then find the link to your state's codes. Search for the law or statute that defines teacher tenure. What is the number of the statute or law? _____

Rationale: Candidates must access specific state laws throughout the course beginning the third class meeting. There are various laws that address teacher tenure. This assignment requires a careful reading of the laws and the use of another tool in Lexis-Nexis.

Additional items assigned in the web search related to information found on various websites: the state board of education for regulations, the teachers' union for master contracts, the state's certification office

for the code of ethics, the First Amendment Center for publications concerning religion and public schools, and items related to the use of the university's online course management system.

Another use of authentic resources is a research project concerning the laws related to students with disabilities. Candidates had been confused by the similarities and differences of IDEA, Section 504, and ADA. A new assignment was designed which has been successful as evidenced by the final exam results. Candidates use online resources and their districts' policies and procedures manuals to research the three laws. They create PowerPoint presentations that principals could use with teachers to address the following points: civil rights and funding issues, the protection each law affords, the agencies to which each law applies, and public school implementation of each law.

The following chart presents the all course topics, whether the chapter guide was revised, and the mode of delivery used for the topic.

Topic	Chapter Guide Revisions	Face-to-Face	Online Assignments
Online Tools for Principals			web search
Legal Framework	•	•	none
Student Rights in Non-instructional issues	•		chat
Church/State Relations	•	•	research
Students with Disabilities	•		research chat
Attendance and Instructional Issues	•		chat
Student Classifications	•	•	research
Student Discipline	•		chat
Tort Liability	•	•	view PowerPoint
Teacher Rights, Employment Issues and Dismissal	•		research chat
Master Contracts and Teacher Handbooks	•	•	research

The Structure for Communication

Since the class did not meet face-to-face every week or every other week at times, structuring opportunities to ensure clear communication was critical. There were three challenges the author faced. The first challenge was created by an advantage of a blended course: candidates may work on assignments at times other than the class meeting time so it was important to have open and multiple lines of communication. The author included in the syllabus a university email address, a cell phone number, and a BlackBerry address and invited candidates to use them. The author used the email "out of office" function to keep candidates informed as to when and how she could be reached when away from the office more than one day. Candidates have not taken advantage of this invitation and have used it appropriately.

The second challenge involved the use of the university system's online course management system. The author previously used this system to post grades, the chapter guides, some assignments, and the grading rubrics. For the blended course, the author expanded the system's use by establishing archived chat rooms to verify participation by the candidates in the chats; posting all items to save paper and printing costs; posting course announcements to clarify issues related to assignments; and using folders to archive work electronically. The candidates and the author had to learn to use the system in new ways. In order to ensure understanding of the system, the author assessed candidates' attitudes and skills by asking during the first class meeting about their experiences and concerns related to online coursework. The web search required

candidates to locate items posted under the assignments, to log into a chat room, and to print the chapter guide needed for the next class meeting.

The third challenge was determining how to assign candidates to chat rooms. During the first class meeting, candidates completed a form with their names, districts, and three preferred chat times. The information was used to assign candidates to chat groups at their preferred times and create groups with members from various districts. The author has distributed the grouping and their assignments during the second class meeting. The following is an example of the form.

Directions for the Chat Room Sign-up Form

Name _____ School _____ District _____

Number your top three preferences for times to participate in online chats. The chats usually take between thirty and forty minutes. After each chat, one person will type a consensus response for the group and send it to the instructor via campus email. The consensus responses will be posted by 6:00 p.m. after all chats have been completed. Each candidate must react to all of the other groups' responses by agreeing or disagreeing with each answer and providing rationale. Responses are due by 9:00 a.m. the day of the next class session as indicated in the syllabus. The instructor will copy and read the responses after 9:00 a.m. to determine what issues need clarification during the next face-to-face class meeting. The group list will be distributed at our next class meeting.

___ 6:00 p.m. night before class ___ 8:00 p.m. night before class ___ 2:30 p.m. day of class
 ___ 3:00 p.m. day of class ___ 3:30 p.m. day of class ___ 4:00 p.m. day of class
 ___ 4:30 p.m. day of class ___ 5:00 p.m. day of class

This process to assign candidates to groups has been successful. The author has revised the form by adding the school level. The information is used to ensure that a group does not have all members from one school level. Multiple perspectives have been important additions to the discussions around problems. Groups meet face-to-face to solve a problem in class prior to working as online groups. This strategy has helped them form relationships prior to the online chat.

The author realized the fourth challenge during the postings of chat room answers: the instructor did not receive some group's answers by the 6:00 p.m. deadline. This happened for three reasons.

1. Problem: A group's answer was sent through the online course management system and not directly to the instructor. Solution: The author searched under messages and assignments in the online course management system.
2. Problem: The answer went to the instructor's junk email box. Solution: The first time this happened, the instructor read the chat archive and wrote a response. Recently the instructor looked in "junk mail" and located the answers.
3. Problem: A candidate did not know what time to send the response. Solution: The instructor read the chat archive and wrote a response. Recently the instructor posted a statement explaining no answer had been received with a direction for candidates to answer it on his or her own.

These problems have not been regular or frequent. Flexibility, patience, and creativity have been critical in dealing with these issues.

The Organization of the Course

The author attended sessions at conferences and on campus that emphasized the importance of organization in the delivery of online and blended courses. The guidance assisted the author in the organization of the course, the posting of materials and the collection of assignments, and the grading of assignments.

The Schedule

The major challenge for the schedule involved determining whether it should be driven by face-to-face meetings every other week, by the sequence of topics, by the author's scheduling conflicts, or a combination. The first time the course was delivered, the class met online every other week after the first two face-to-face class meetings. The author recommends using that format the first time the course is taught as it allowed the author to determine where the gaps were in the course redesign and candidate communication without having too much time before meeting candidates face-to-face again. The author has been using a combination of

the sequence of topics and scheduling conflicts since spring 2007. The following reflects the topics, sequence, and the rationale for the first seven sessions now used by the author:

Topic in Order of Presentation in Blended Course	Order in Traditional Delivery	Online or Face-to-Face	Rationale for Online or Face-to-Face
1. Overview of Course	1 st class	Face-to-Face	Need to establish course outcomes, gather candidate information, clarify issues, begin web search with help if needed
2. Legal Framework	2 nd class	Face-to-Face	Need to ensure that candidates grasp the local, state, and federal legal framework for school law
3. Attendance and Instructional Issues	4 th class	Online	Topic not as complex for first chat room assignment; instructor cannot be in class as she is attending a national conference and can take wireless laptop to post answers. at 6:00.
4. Church and State Relations	3 rd class	Face-to-Face	Topic more complex and requires class discussion
5. Tort Law	12 th class	Face-to-Face	Allows time for tort liability project and to clarify complex issues
6. Students' Rights in Noninstructional Issues	5 th class	Online	Topic not as complex for a chat room assignment; instructor must attend a school district meeting to present principal preparation program and can take wireless laptop to post answers when finished at 6:00
7. Student Classifications	6 th class	Face-to-Face	Complex topic due to a regional district's desegregation issues

The second challenge related to the schedule was helping candidates understand it. In addition to the communication strategies previously described, the author used the schedule published in the syllabus to explain the assignments, topics, and modes of delivery. The following excerpt demonstrates the information necessary to include. A column has been added to present the reader with the rationale for the italicized items.

Date	Class Preparation and Assignments due	Topics and Class Activities	Assignments Made During the Class Meeting	Rationale for <i>Italicized</i> Items
(1) 8/28 F2F		Introductions Course Overview Syllabus Course management system Online Structure Pretest Sign up for groups Begin Web Search	Read Chapter 1 Locate required documents <i>Determine access challenges</i>	Provides date and "F2F" for Face-to-Face and "OL" for Online <i>"Determine access challenges" is assigned to make sure candidates can access the online course management system from home or school</i> "Assign" reminds the candidates they have an assignment due
(2) 9/4 F2F <i>Assign.</i>	Read Chapter 1 Web Search due	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overview of the Legal Framework for "School Law" Overview of group work & course assignments 	Read Chapter 3 using the chapter guide <i>Locate copy of a school board or school council policy on curriculum, instructional issues, school attendance or any other issue related to Chapter 3</i>	Candidates learned how to locate these documents through the web search; will be needed for chat the following week
(3) 9/11 OL <i>Chat</i>	Read Chapter 3 following the chapter guide	<u>School Attendance and Instructional Issues</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Work with group at assigned time to "solve" issue in discussion group.</i> <i>Email a consensus solution at the end of your assigned time.</i> <i>All solutions posted by 6:00 p.m. on 9/11.</i> <i>Individually react to each solution by 9:00 a.m. on 9/18; submit responses via email</i> 	Read Chapter 13 using the chapter guide (Tort Liability) Complete Awareness Document #1 on a board or school council policy on curriculum, instructional issues, school attendance, or any other issue discussed in Chapter 3. Use the directions and rubric to guide your work.	"Chat" reminds the candidates understand that they have a chat The bulleted items are the directions that are also on the chapter guide to help remind candidates of what they should do.

The author realized during the first semester of the blended delivery that the syllabus did not clearly articulate to all candidates the due dates and times for assignments. Assignments were not received by the instructor, were sent via email instead of through the course management system, were brought to class instead of sent electronically, or sent electronically instead of being brought to class. A graphic organizer was designed in Fall 2007 to clarify the assignments, the due dates, how they should be submitted, and the point values for each assignment. The following is an excerpt from one semester's organizer. This additional method of communicating, while listed under organization, helped improve both the communication and organization of the course schedule.

Date	Assignment	Points Possible
3/7 F2F	Class participation	4
3/14 OL	Participated in chat	2
3/21 by 9:00 a.m. electronically	Reactions to Chapter 4 group responses	2
3/21 F2F in class	Class participation	4
	• Practice Problem #3	10
3/28 F2F in class	Class participation	4
	• Culture Conversation	10
	• Practice Problem #5	10
4/4 OL	Participated in chat	2
4/11	Spring Break	
4/18 by 9:00 a.m. electronically	Reactions to Chapter 7 solutions	2
4/18 F2F in class	Class participation	4
	• Tort Walk	
4/25 by 6:00 p.m. electronically	• PowerPoint	30
	• Practice Problem #6	10

Posting of Materials and Collection of Assignments

Candidates posting or submitting materials incorrectly posed the greatest challenge. The author used a variety of methods to post materials and collect assignments. They were not always successful. Some were sent to the instructor's campus email address, some were brought to class instead of being posted, and some were sent through the online course management messaging system. The process used by the author in spring 2008 finally solved this problem. In addition to the organizer previously discussed, the author posted materials using three functions in the online course management system: syllabus, resources, and assignments. The syllabus was the only item posted under that heading. Posted under "resources" were items candidates needed to prepare for class or to complete assignments that would be due in face-to-face class meetings. This included all chapter guides, all scoring rubrics, the pretest, individual assignments called "practice problems", directions for other individual assignments, readings on contracts, the Supreme Court cases for the final exam, and Power Points on ESL, tort liability, and student classifications. Posted under "assignments" were items that were due electronically and not during face-to-face class meetings. This included each candidate's responses to the group answers from the chat rooms, the Power Point on students with disabilities, a tort liability assignment, and two practice problems. All other assignments could not be posted and submitted electronically through "assignments" so they had to be submitted as required in class.

In the move from a traditional to blended delivery, only one adjustment was made to the assessment of candidates. Candidates received four (4) total points for class preparation and participation during class meetings. For online work, they received two (2) points for participating in a chat and two (2) points for responding to each group's responses. All other revisions to assessments have been driven only by changes in the curriculum and the standards. The following is an example of a "practice problem" and the rubric. For the blended delivery, they have been posted rather than distributed as hard copies in class.

Practice Problem Example

You are the principal of a high school. It is three weeks before the end of the school year. Two teachers come to you outraged. They have just read the draft of the last edition of the student newspaper. One article written by two seniors criticized the performance of all teachers in general and specifically named these two teachers. The article described events that had occurred in their classrooms. The students wrote

about how these two teachers threw away homework, posted failing papers on the bulletin board, and tested the students over material that had not been taught. The two teachers are demanding that you make the students change it or you leave it out of the paper. What do you do?

HINT: Make sure that you refer to your school policy, your Board of Education policy, and your Student Code of Conduct. Attach a copy of the documents that you used to answer this problem.

Rubric

Educational Leadership Rubric
Practice Problems
Standards 3, 5, and 6

Criteria/Levels	(3)	(2)	(1)
<u>Purpose</u> To concisely apply knowledge from chapter to a “real life” situation (6) and Code of Ethics (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishes a purpose and maintains a clear and sharp focus Applies knowledge to situation in two to three pages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies purpose but some lapses in focus Applies knowledge to situation in less than two pages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Misses the point of the assignment; limited awareness of purpose
<u>Content</u> To provide the correct legal and ethical support for the proposed solution (3, 5, 6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports the solution with correct and complete information* Evidence of analysis and/or application to schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports the solution with correct information; additional information is needed to assist the reader to understand the solution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The solution is not supported by correct information.
<u>Organization</u> Structure of the paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coherent organization Correct paragraph structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited organization Does not use paragraph structure but ideas are organized 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Random and/or weak organization
<u>Conventions</u> Grammar, spelling, punctuation and capitalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Excellent control of grammar, spelling, punctuation and capitalization No errors Uses APA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation and capitalization Two or three errors as a result of using spell-check 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation and capitalization Four or more errors as a result of using spell-check

*correct and complete: includes appropriate cases, laws, district/corporation documents, and/or policies

Will a Blended Course Work for You?

The author prefers the blended approach because of the flexibility it provides. Due to other School of

Education duties, the author has conflicts with two to four class meetings a semester. The course has been planned around these activities to avoid canceling classes or arranging for someone to cover a class. Conflicts with various spring breaks in the service area have also been eliminated.

The personal challenges associated with the blended course include scheduling two to three hours to read the candidates' individual responses to the groups' responses, assisting candidates between class meetings in navigating the online environment, and troubleshooting chat room difficulties. The author has compared course grades, work samples, and feedback from the traditional course delivery to the blended course delivery. Both methods have demonstrated similar successful candidate results. The author believes that the success can be attributed to the careful planning of instruction, the organization of the delivery, and the commitment to candidate assistance.

The author recommends that an instructor consider the following before making a decision to utilize a blended delivery.

1. Are these present at your institution: a comprehensive course management system, responsive technical support, and professional development related to teaching and learning in an online environment?
2. Are you comfortable working and communicating in an online environment?
3. Are you willing to be responsive to candidates' questions and challenges on a daily basis and at various times of the day and evening?
4. Are you able to deal with unforeseen problems such as the network going down or crashing, candidates submitting their work incorrectly, or the instructor posting documents that candidates cannot open due to systems issues?

Before seriously considering the blended approach, one should be able to answer each of the questions with a resounding "yes". Otherwise, the challenges will outweigh the benefits, candidate learning may not be successful, and instructor frustration will occur.